



Eyes on  
Animals

Watching  
out for their  
welfare

# ***The welfare of male goat-kids***

An investigation into the welfare of male-kids on the farm, during transport and slaughter in The Netherlands

**- summary -**



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## Introduction

In late 2017 Eyes on Animals began a long-term investigation into the welfare of male goat-kids in the dairy goat industry. Our investigation was prompted by a visit to a goat fattening-farm where we found many dead and sick male-kids. Our findings caused much concern and revealed that more than 30% (with a peak of 66%) of male-kids on Dutch farms do not reach slaughter age.

The Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality ordered the goat industry to take action to reduce the mortality amongst male-kids. As of 1 January 2018, the Plan of Action was implemented.

We researched:

- What is the effectiveness of the Plan of Action on the ground?
- What are the most significant welfare risks in a male-kid's life?
- What possibilities for improvement exist?
- What initiatives are already in place to improve the welfare of kids?

To answer these questions, Eyes on Animals did the following:

- We visited 23 dairy goat farms, 12 slaughterhouses and 3 fattening farms in The Netherlands; about half of the companies welcomed us. The remaining companies had no interest in a visit or communicating with EonA.
- On three different occasions we followed a truck collecting male-kids from different farms for slaughter. On another occasion we checked on a truck which was bringing culled dairy goats and male-kids to a slaughterhouse.
- We spoke with dairy goat farmers, fatteners, transporters, traders, slaughterers, veterinarians and the NVWA (Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority).

In addition, we looked at possible improvements in goat farming, based on scientific literature and practical research, such as keeping kids with their mothers and providing climbing opportunities.

## Impact of Industry-Action plan

Previously, dairy-goat farmers were held responsible for the male-kids born on their farm only up until the day the kids left the farm. But as of January 1st, 2018 (Plan of Action from the industry) dairy goat farmers are held accountable for the mortality rate among their male-kids up to age 21 days, even if the kids have already left the dairy farm to go to a fattening farm. At the same time, many farmers specializing in fattening male kids had been forced to terminate their business because they did not have their building permits in order. This has caused the following outcomes:

### **1. Positive: More male-kids are fattened on the dairy goat farm**

A large number of dairy goat farmers have started fattening their male-kids themselves on their dairy farm. In 2017, an estimated 10-20% of the male-kids were fattened on the dairy goat farm. In 2019, this had increased to approximately 40-50%. Although improvements for the housing and care of these male-kids are necessary - it is an improvement that male-kids are fattened on the birth farm because this avoids transport at a very young age to fattening farms.



*More male-kids are now fattened on the farm of birth which alleviates transport at a young age but housing conditions still need to be improved.*

## **2. Positive: Condition of male-kids possibly improved**

In 2019 only about 10% of male-kids were brought to fattening farms. The goat-fattening farmers told us that the kids arrived in better shape than in previous years as guidelines had been developed regarding colostrum management on the dairy goat farm (male kids were likely now getting colostrum on time and better-quality colostrum). Additionally, fewer young male kids from different farms were being mixed now, meaning that there was less risk of spreading diseases.

Unfortunately, these positive signs cannot yet be confirmed. Mortality rates have not been published, so trends could not be recorded. In fact, mortality rates were not published since 2017. However, Minister Schouten recently published mortality figures for 2019, but these do not really help identify trends, because they do not represent the overall status; they only relate to *registered* kids. The number of kids that die before they are registered are excluded from the mortality figure because they are unrecorded in the database, as if they never existed. Also, no distinction is made between male and female kids and the location of death is not recorded (dairy goat farm or fattening farm).

## **3. Negative: Many more young kids still dependent on milk slaughtered**

Increasingly, dairy-goat farmers are having their male-kids slaughtered at only 7 days of age (minimum age to be legally transported). It is estimated this happened to 30-40% of the male-kids in 2019, and as many as 80-90% of the male-kids during the 2020 birthing season. The increase is due to COVID-19 which is responsible for even fewer sales of goat-kid meat in southern European, English and Dutch catering industries. This worries Eyes on Animals. For the dairy goat farmer, there is little (external) incentive to take good care of these unweaned kids until they are slaughtered. Every kid that must be transported to the slaughterhouse *costs* the dairy goat farmer 5-10 euro. If the kids die on the farm, this *saves* transport and slaughter costs. In addition, dairy goat farmers are often not held accountable for the deaths of kids that happen within the first 7 days after their birth (up until December 2020 farmers were not held accountable for deaths of kids when they died within the first 6 months after being born)), because up until 7 days of age, kids do not have to be registered and are therefore often not even recorded in the database.



*Many male-kids are sent to slaughter 7 days after birth*

We hear from various independent sources that the unweaned kids transported to slaughter at just 7 days of age often did not receive colostrum after birth. The farmer did not see the point in wasting high-value colostrum on his male newborns when they were just to be slaughtered in 7 days, giving the colostrum rather to the higher-valued female kids kept to replace the mothers. Additionally, because these farms do not have a reputation for having high mortality (the kids leave after only 7 days and are therefore not yet registered), the NVWA or KwaliGeit are not aware of the full issue. Moreover, transport and slaughter of such young animals is undesirable because they are still completely dependent on milk but do not get any during their long journeys (6-7 hours) nor in the lairage at the slaughterhouse (<12 hours). Male kids en route to slaughter are therefore deprived of milk for many hours and become weak very quickly. Practically, it is also difficult to give kids milk (or any other liquid) during transport or in the lairage of the slaughterhouse, as not all kids know how to drink from a teat and some of them are too weak to drink themselves. In the waiting pens of the slaughterhouses there is water or sometimes electrolyte available, but observations show that many of the kids do not drink it as they seem unfamiliar with the drinking apparatus. Secondly, at this young age kids need milk, not water or electrolytes. However, the provision of milk both during transport and in the waiting pens of the slaughterhouse (<12 hours) is not mandatory by law.

## **Animal welfare on dairy goat farms**

### **Insufficient climbing options and elevated resting places**

Although the dairy goat industry has a positive image (dairy goats often live in spacious barns with straw-bedding, natural light, and good ventilation), little consideration is given to the behavioural needs of goats. Goats naturally live in hilly and mountainous landscapes; they have a strong need to climb and prefer an elevated area to rest. The standard barns visited by Eyes on Animals, for both dairy goats and kids, often did not offer climbing opportunities or elevated resting places. All goats were kept on the floor.

### **Immediate separation of kids from their mothers after birth**

In dairy-goat farming, kids are taken away from their mother immediately after birth. As a result, the mother goats are unable to feed, care for, protect or raise their kids – which is a major restriction to their maternal behavior.



*In dairy-goat farming, kids are taken away from their mother immediately after birth.*

The newborn kids are then placed in a small barren box, where they are given (some) colostrum by hand, but this unnatural environment restricts both their mental and physical well-being because there is no possibility to interact with their mother or other kids and their movement is restricted.



*After separation newborns are placed in small boxes, often alone.*

### **Bad colostrum management**

High-mortality among male-kids is largely due to poor colostrum management. Colostrum is often offered too late or provided in insufficient amounts, or is of poor quality. This is often because the kids are not given priority; they yield nothing, and the attention and best colostrum goes mainly to the female kids which will eventually replace the older dairy goats. According to our sources, male-kids going to slaughter already at the age of 7 days often do not get any colostrum at all. Moreover, male-kids that fall sick are often denied veterinary treatment due to their low economic value.



*Due to poor colostrum management male-kids get sick easily. Veterinary treatment is often denied due to their low economic value.*

### **Inadequate housing**

At some farms, the housing for male-kids is inadequate. Dairy-goat farmers who fatten their own male-kids out of necessity, sometimes have insufficient room to house them, and regularly do not get permission from the municipality to build an additional barn. As a result, provisional but unprofessional solutions are devised to house the kids – resulting in, for example, insufficient space, poor air quality and as a result high rates of diseases.

## **Animal welfare on goat-fattening farms**

### **High mortality rate**

Mortality rates on fattening farms were very high in 2017 with an average of 32%. The main causes: inadequate supply of colostrum after birth on the dairy-goat farm, mixing of kids from different farms resulting in spread of disease and limited options to treat sick kids (administration of medicine is not allowed in the 28 days prior to slaughter). It is possible that the industry's Plan of Action and fewer restrictions on the use of medication will have reduced the level of mortality, but since no complete and true mortality figures have been published since 2017, a statement cannot be made about this.



*On fattening farms mortality rates are high due to inadequate supply of colostrum on the dairy-goat farm and the mixing of kids from different farms.*

### **Supply of healthier male-kids**

Fattening farmers tell us that the condition of the male-kids coming from the dairy farms has improved since 2018 and better agreements have been made with dairy goat farmers about the colostrum policy. In addition, the KNMvD and LTO initiated that the rules surrounding medication for goats be changed so that those goats falling sick can be treated easier.. Unfortunately, it cannot yet be known if these positive steps decreased mortality rates. Since 2017 no complete and true mortality rates have been published. Furthermore, it is expected that the improved accessibility of medication will result in more unweaned kids being kept and further fattened instead of slaughtered at a young age.

### **Animal welfare during transport**

Male-kids are slaughtered at a very young age. In 2019, about 50-60% of the male-kids that went to slaughter were only between 2-6 weeks of age (from the dairy or fattening goat farm). The remaining 30-40% of the kids were transported to the slaughterhouse at only 7 days of age (unweaned kids). In the first half of 2020, 80-90% of kids were being sent to slaughter at just 7 days of age, due mostly to COVID 19 which caused a further drop in the market for goat meat. A small number of the kids (about 10%) are transported twice in their short lives. First to the fattening farm (when they are a few days old, which is permitted when the distance is less than 100 km) and then to the slaughterhouse (when they are 2-6 weeks old). Organic dairy goat farming is an exception; in this case, kids must stay on the dairy-goat farm for at least 21 days. They can only be transported when they are, therefore, a minimum of 3 weeks of age.



*Many male-kids are brought to slaughter 7 days after birth.*

### **Unweaned kids deprived of milk for too long**

The transport of 7-day old kids to the slaughterhouse involves considerable risk to animal welfare. The kids are completely dependent on milk. Their immune system falls or fails when milk is withdrawn. During our inspections, the transport journeys took a long time (6-7 hours) because only a small number of kids (or milk goats) were picked up at each farm meaning the truck had to make many stops before being full. During this period, the kids are deprived of water, electrolytes and milk. Once at the slaughterhouse, there is often a waiting time of at least a few hours. By this time, the kids are desperate for milk. They do get offered water or electrolytes, however, many kids cannot drink properly, if at all, because they do not understand the drinking system, or are too tired. Their condition deteriorates very quickly. Water or electrolytes are anyhow not to be seen as replacements for milk (food). Milk is vital at their young age and depriving them of it is a serious compromise to their welfare.

The slaughter regulations state the provision of milk (food) is only mandatory after a waiting period of more than 12 hours in the slaughter lairage, but the inclusion of transport time (6-7 hours) increases this milk withdrawal time to approximately 18-19 hours – which is far too long for unweaned kids. We were told that one slaughterhouse, with long waiting times, does provide milk, but most of them do not. Slaughterhouse employees report that the condition of the kids at arrival is regularly extremely poor. During transport inspections Eyes on Animals witnessed unweaned kids regularly lose their footing on the loading-ramp. Also, transporters and traders confirm that unweaned kids are not transport worthy because they are unable to walk steadily on their own.

### **Long transport times**

Transport takes an average of 6-7 hours because kids are picked up from different dairy goat farms. During this period, the kids do not receive fluids. It is known that the kids are sometimes brought to and picked up at assembly centers which can increase the journey time. It is unknown what the situation is with the housing and care of the kids at these assembly centers because Eyes on Animals was not welcome at these facilities

### **Loading method**



Kids were lifted by the neck when loaded. Kids have a strong neck but holding them in this way for too long is not acceptable. Moreover, the hand was sometimes placed on the throat which made breathing difficult and caused the kids to panic.



*Kids are lifted by their neck when loaded on the ramp.*

## **Animal welfare in the slaughterhouse**

### **Transport age**

Goats must be at least 7 days of age to legally be transported to slaughter. Slaughterhouses report that they receive kids that are recorded as 7 days old, but are actually younger. It is easy to tamper with dates of birth. This is also apparent from investigations by research platform Investico.

### **Long waiting times without milk**

Waiting times at slaughterhouses vary considerably, but can exceed 12 hours. Kids are sometimes brought into the slaughterhouse in the evening prior to slaughter and are not slaughtered until the next morning or afternoon. The rule is that unweaned kids should be given priority (over fattened goats and adult dairy goats) in order to reduce their waiting time, but this does not always happen. If unweaned kids are not slaughtered immediately, they must receive water or electrolytes. When waiting longer than 12 hours, they must be given milk.

There are no requirements for the quality or the type of milk (artificial or milk from a cow or goat) to be given, nor about the temperature it should be administered. Slaughterhouses tell us that many male-kids do not drink the water or electrolyte because they do not know how the drinking system works, cannot drink independently from a teat or are too tired or weak to even try to drink. Because they do not drink, they weaken quickly.

### **Restraining and stunning**

Depending on the slaughterhouse, kids are slaughtered while fully conscious or after being stunned. If stunned, this is done with electric tongs or a captive bolt pistol. We have visited several slaughterhouses and met with their directors, but to date have not yet seen ourselves the restraint, stunning or slaughter of the kids because at the time of our visits no kids were to be slaughtered. Due to COVID-19 some of our planned visits were rescheduled to the 2021 birthing season. Some slaughterhouses have indicated that they have problems with the stunning of the kids because they are so small and agile and the

stunning and restraint equipment used is often designed for larger animals making it less effective when used on smaller animals.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Dairy goat farming is very lucrative, due to the increasing popularity of goat cheese. The milk price has been high for years and increases each year. There is therefore room financially (in comparison to cow-dairy farming, for example) to improve the welfare level of kids and dairy goats.. Goat kids are an integral part of the dairy farm - without the birth of kids there would be no milk. So, there is no excuse to treat kids as a waste product. Goat farmers must take responsibility and take good care of their kids, even if this means investing money. To improve the welfare of kids, EonA insists on the following recommendations:

1. Increase the **legal minimum age for transport to 21 days**. This should be included in national regulations. It avoids transporting kids that are still dependent on milk, which have undeveloped immune systems and are unsteady on their legs. It also encourages dairy farmers to take better care of their male-kids from the moment they are born to avoid health problems on the farm or high mortality records.
2. Kids should be **registered in the I&R system immediately after birth** (at least within three days) so that mortality in the critical first-week period is recorded.
3. Set stricter requirements for **enrichment, such as climbing opportunities**, within the KwaliGeit and SKAL system.
4. Dairy cooperatives should **reserve a small percentage of the milk price** to improve the welfare of male-kids and to improve the marketing of male-kids' meat. Therefore, dairy cooperatives should (financially) motivate dairy-goat farmers to **spread-out the birthing season throughout the year**.
5. Encourage dairy-goat farmers to experiment with keeping **kids with their mothers in the** goat herd for a minimum of 12 weeks and encourage a market for this.
6. Set stricter requirements for **colostrum management** within the KwaliGeit system.
7. Municipalities should grant **permits for the building of male-kids' barns** on dairy goat farms, so that dairy-goat farmers can keep and fatten their kids instead of transporting them at a young age off the farm to slaughter.
8. **Stricter requirements for the mortality** of male-kids, specifically a maximum of 7% (about the same as female-kids).
9. The industry, with the help of the government, should conduct more research into the ideal method for **restraining and stunning** kids in slaughterhouses and, if necessary, set specific requirements for this.
10. During the birthing season, the NVWA and KwaliGeit should carry out audits to ensure **correct registration, correct care and housing of kids** and highlight any incorrect killing methods on the dairy goat farm.

The full report on the welfare of male goat-kids is currently only available in Dutch and can be read [here >>](#)